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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 000466

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR ECA (P.HARRISON); ECA/A (T. FARRELL); EAP/PD
(P.KOVACH/D. MONK); EAP/BCLTV (J.STROTZ/C.JESS)

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SUBJECT: KEEPING THE LID ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AND
ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN HO CHI MINH CITY

REF: A) HCMC 0342 B) 02 HCMC 1170 C) HCMC 0156

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Despite a flurry of economic reforms and trade liberalization heralded by the signing of the Bilateral Trade Agreement over a year ago, Ho Chi Minh City's press reporting and cultural programs remain mired in self-censorship, media "guidelines" and an arbitrary permit process that strongly limit the freedom of expression for thoughtful writers, journalists, moviemakers and theater directors. During the past 15 months, as Post has sponsored its first live cultural performances and broadened its contacts within media organizations and the artistic community, we too have experienced the gauntlet of obstacles created by groups of small-minded ideologues.
End summary.

NEWS MEDIA: WE KNOW THE TRUTH, WE JUST CAN'T TELL IT

¶12. (U) Ho Chi Minh City TV (HTV) is government-owned and the only local TV station in HCMC. Domestic news programs follow a time-honored tradition of airing mostly positive stories about courtesy calls, government-organized seminars and conferences, and visiting dignitaries. World news visual coverage has generally been fairly open, drawing on BBC, CNN and other news services. However, there is no guarantee that the Vietnamese voiceover will bear any relationship to what the viewer sees on the TV screen. Coverage of the war in Iraq was one-sided. There was no reporting about Iraqis celebrating Saddam's fall or toppling statues of him, let alone welcoming the coalition forces. Entertainment programs are of fair quality for a developing country, but lack anything approaching contemporary political satire or serious talk shows about sensitive issues.

¶13. (U) Like the rest of Vietnam, the press in HCMC has ownership roots in the local government or Communist Party. A handful of the city's numerous newspapers and magazines are considered serious news sources. They must adhere to unwritten guidelines, avoiding criticism of the government and the Party except in particular cases, such as certain corruption trials.

¶14. (SBU) A vivid example is the recent dismissal of the editor-in-chief of the "Tuoi Tre" newspaper, Mr. Le Van Nui. "Tuoi Tre" is owned by the Youth Union of HCMC, a government-sanctioned mass organization. Mr. Nui had been under a cloud of suspicion ever since his paper published a poll during President Clinton's visit in 2000. This poll asked readers to rate the leaders they most admired. The results showed that Mr. Clinton was more popular than Ho Chi Minh. Authorities stripped Mr. Nui of his press association membership about a year ago, although he kept his top position at the paper until this month. Then "Tuoi Tre's" focus on top GVN leaders implicated in a well-publicized criminal trial (the "Nam Cam" case, which opened this April) seemed to renew official interest in Mr. Nui's departure. He has been replaced by a local book publisher, Mr. Le Hoang, who is respected for his business skills but who has no journalism experience. Mr. Nui, in the meantime, has been sidelined into the directorship of Tuoi Tre News Group's real estate and land management firm.

¶15. (SBU) Coverage/commentary on the Iraq war in HCMC was negative, with the daily press running graphic photos of civilian casualties and editorial content focusing on the "unwelcome American aggression." Sources have told Post that media editors received written guidelines on Iraq war coverage. Reporters and editors have said they know the real story of the coalition's victory, but were forbidden to report it.

FILM: TREAD LIGHTLY

¶16. (SBU) The best-known recent case is the expulsion of film star Don Duong from the actors' union. Technically, he had violated a government rule for appearing in foreign films: submitting the script in advance for approval. Don Duong and his family were subjected to police questioning and harassment for his "betrayal of the homeland" in movies

such as "Green Dragon" (life in a Vietnamese refugee resettlement camp in the U.S.) and "We Were Soldiers Once" (a balanced portrayal of soldiers' lives on both sides during the early days of the Vietnam War). Blackballed by the film association, his children taunted and intimidated at school, menacing phone calls, "invitations" to the local police station, and vandalism at his sister's restaurant finally drove Don Duong and his family to emigrate to the U.S. (ref A). The orchestrated media attacks and forced unemployment were pointed reminders to his fellow actors: stick to pure entertainment or politically correct drama.

17. (U) Two recent screen releases have mildly criticized the socio-cultural realities of contemporary Saigon. "Gai Nhay" ("Sensitive Girl"), a film about the exploitation of bar girls, implicitly criticizes the poverty that drives them to that lifestyle and the callousness of a system that would create such an underclass. Sex for drug money, heavy drinking, and slimy nouveau riche Vietnamese are also featured. "Luoi Troi" ("Tangled in the Sky's Web") took the Golden Kite prize at Vietnam's Film Festival this year. It deals with the corruption of individual Party members and hints at institutional flaws, but stops short of explicitly criticizing the government. It may have been a critical success at the Film Festival, but its commercial run has been much shorter than "Gai Nhay".

18. (SBU) The GVN recently moved to allow the establishment of private film companies. To say there has not been a mad rush to take advantage of this "opening" would be an understatement. The start-up process for the first company(ies) would likely be unpredictable and time-consuming. Post believes that any company brave enough to wade through the application forms and obtain a license, would certainly not risk losing its investment in order to focus on social or political issues.

19. (U) In the words of one contact, media organizations and the film industry may criticize "below the waist" (lower-ranking members of the Party or government), but not take aim at the head (national leaders, ideology etc.)

STAGE: AS IN "ALL THE WORLD IS (NOT)"

10. (SBU) Serious theater in HCMC is virtually non-existent. The British Council sponsored a contemporary version of "Romeo and Juliet" last year. Street people depicted actual characters, but the setting was blandly anywhere. (Post Note: Homelessness and abandonment are increasing social problems in HCMC's growing metropolis of 8 million, but absent any specific country references, few Vietnamese in the audience recognized the subtle message here. End note.) Playwrights, theater directors and actors practice self-censorship, since all performances must be reviewed by a board of censors prior to the formal opening. Contacts tell us that if they wish to perform a small play or dance performance that may have daring or sensitive content, they simply call the performance "a party" and the audience is by invitation only.

11. (SBU) One prominent artist was visited by the police after leading a group of cultural performers to the U.S. Another colleague on the trip had made disparaging remarks about the Vietnamese Government, and so the nominal "leader" was called to account. Understandably rattled that the GVN would hold an individual responsible for the conduct of an entire group, this artist was about to give up on ever traveling overseas again. As months have passed, it now looks as though this contact will be able to resume international travel. However, the avant-garde performances this individual is noted for Q with no political content Q are still under increased scrutiny.

12. (U) On the more humorous side, one traveling Vietnamese artist has been quoted in the Western media as saying that since his works are so sophisticated, they are "beyond the comprehension" of the cultural censors, so they don't come and interfere.

MUSIC: VIETNAM'S "BOB DYLAN" SILENCED

13. (SBU) Pop singers tend not to have problems if they pay the proper licensing fees (indexed very high for profit events) and submit recordings of their music for review. One prominent singer, however, faces frequent harassment for his sexual orientation and for a well-known (by word of mouth) denunciation of the GVN, which he made from a stage in Hue several years ago.

14. (SBU) There are virtually no songs on HCMC Radio (government controlled) with political overtones. HCMC Radio now bans a collection of songs by Trinh Cong Son, a popular anti-war/anti-U.S. activist during the 1960s and 1970s, because listeners have been loosely interpreting his lyrics to include repression under the current government.

¶15. (U) Classical music concerts by the Ho Chi Minh City Symphony take place on the 9th of every month. Post has noted that performing excerpts from classical standards Q including some excerpts from Bach/Mozart/Brahms requiems and masses Q draws no particular attention.

EXHIBITIONS: DON'T SHOW US WHAT WE DON'T WANT TO SEE

¶16. (U) Photo and art exhibits with non-revolutionary or non-liberation themes are rare. In the spring 2002, a British- sponsored photojournalism workshop had its exhibit closed by the censors during the opening ceremony. Several photos which portrayed the nitty-gritty realism of street life in HCMC were unacceptable to the culture censors.

¶17. (SBU) Post has been able to sponsor two exhibits related to the September 11 terrorist attacks ("Headlines of History" poster show in September 2002 and "9/11: View from Ground Zero" in February 2003). These required an exhaustive searches for willing venues and a painstaking effort to detail to the censors the contents of the exhibits (photos, translations of each newspaper headline and caption etc.). Even then, whether or not our co-sponsors would be issued the appropriate permits was in doubt to the last minute. So while we have nudged open the door, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to arrange exhibits relating to American democracy and civil rights.

WHO ARE THE CULTURAL BRAINS AND BRAWN?

¶18. (SBU) PA25, which is the cultural censorship branch of the Ministry of Public Affairs ("the culture police"), is often called into action. In film actor Don Duong's case, PA25 officers were the ones who brought him in for questioning. They tried to intimidate an apology and confession out of him. On a recent trip to the central coast, when the People's Committee of Khanh Hoa Province did not want the Consul General to meet with professors and students at the local university, teachers' training college, and school of music and art, PA25 was dispatched to tell at least one rector and his senior staff that they "should find it inconvenient" to be available for the CG's appointment. Other confirmed interlocutors were suddenly summoned by PA25 to a meeting at the People's Committee just before the CG's scheduled arrival at their institution. On another occasion in Binh Thuan Province, public security police and the People's Committee external relations officer jointly tried to prevent the DPO from visiting an ethnic Cham princess and her husband who run a small tourist museum, claiming the DPO needed prior "permission."

¶19. (SBU) The gatekeepers for HCMC's flow of information and the performing and visual arts remain formidable. The local Department of Culture and Information, the Party Commission on Ideology and Culture, the Peoples Aid Committee and the Ministry of Public Security continue to be narrow-minded, arbitrary and obstructionist when deciding which artistic work should be disseminated through the media, exhibitions, or live performances. Post's own Vietnamese co-sponsors for cultural performances have had to submit the music and lyrics to the Department of Culture and Information in order to get a permit for each event. Post can only wonder. Did these minders actually think we would try to sneak in a non-revolutionary piano note?

¶20. (SBU) COMMENT: Post believes there is no big cultural opening around the corner in southern Vietnam. Journalists and editors Q perhaps because they have relatively better access to sources and information Q are becoming more inquisitive. And there are certainly individuals in both the media and the arts who follow their professional ethics and conscience. However, if they fall into the bad graces of the powers-that-be (as in the case of film actor Don Duong and newspaper editor Le Van Nui), they cannot count on the support of colleagues who themselves can't afford to be blacklisted or stripped of their accreditation. Post continues to build relations with journalists, artist, and the cultural gatekeepers, looking for appropriate candidates for the International Visitors program and other exchange opportunities. As we keep pushing at the door of free expression, these programs will help carry them across the threshold with us. YAMAUCHI